

Tiny Georgia town preps for population surge

‘Rockwell village’ has idyllic appeal, plans for 1,500 new homes.



Fewer than 8,000 residents call Auburn home now, but the hamlet is bracing for growth, with the number of planned new homes being an indicator. The Atlanta Regional Commission says most counties in metro Atlanta should see their population at least double by 2050. TYLER WILKINS/TYLER.WILKINS@AJC.COM

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GWINNETT AND BARROW AUBURN

People seeking the pleasures of pastoral living will soon double the population of a quaint town once known as a railroad hub on the edge of Barrow and Gwinnett counties.

Auburn is split by railroad tracks running parallel to U.S. 29/Ga.

8. Its historic downtown area to the north pays homage to its railroad history with a bright red caboose and mom-and-pops set up in tiny cottages known as the Whistlestop Shops.

“It’s like an updated Norman Rockwell village,” said Mayor Linda Blechinger, smiling while describing her bucolic town at a City Hall conference table.

The hamlet is equidistant from Athens and Atlanta, creating a haven for big-city workers who enjoy living in a quiet atmosphere.

Fewer than 8,000 residents currently call Auburn home, but that number will double in less than five years based on the number of new homes being built, Blechinger said.

A 2,000-acre development known as Rowen, billed as a “knowledge community” with hopes from county officials to become the state’s largest employment center focused on agriculture, medicine and the environment, will soon be built along Ga. 316 near Auburn.

Auburn’s character may be unique, but its growing pains are not. All 21 counties counted by the Atlanta Regional Commission as part of metro Atlanta are expected to grow. Most of them are projected to at least double their population by 2050, according to the agency.

The push to the suburbs and exurbs can partly be explained by the pandemic, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution has reported.

Teleworking freed some people from their daily commutes and convinced urban dwellers to plant roots farther out, as did the perception of high crime in Atlanta.

“(Young families) are looking for something that is not too far from the city but still affords them to be able to have their own house,” Blechinger said.

Local leaders have big plans to keep up with the inevitable growth. Auburn has planned for years to expand its downtown area, Blechinger said, but the pandemic made it more timely.

The city expects to open its new \$8.5 million municipal complex by the end of next year. The 33,000-square-foot building off U.S. 29/Ga. 8 near Auburn Elementary School will house both city staff and the police department.

Officials saw the need to spend penny sales tax dollars on a new facility to give staff more space — and to potentially limit chaos during a catastrophic emergency.

The City Hall and police department are currently on 4th Avenue in front of the tracks. A train derailment could force first responders to evacuate, preventing them from performing their jobs, Blechinger said, citing a case in another city in which a rail accident caused a chlorine gas leak.

The new digs will also help recruit new officers and entice them to stay, said Chris Hodge, chief of the Auburn Police Department.

Encircling the complex will be Harmony, a residential project with a mix of single-family homes and townhomes. It boasts the same architect as Serenbe, a village-like community near Chattahoochee Hills in south Fulton County.

Harmony residents will have access to a barn as a central gathering spot, with fire pits and a caterer’s kitchen, community garden, pocket parks and possibly a coffee

shop. Raised gardens with trees, shrubs and flowers will run parallel to the sidewalks.

“There will never be a time when something beautiful isn’t happening,” said Blechinger with a chuckle.

The first phase of Harmony, consisting of 137 houses, will be completed around the same time as the municipal complex, by the end of next year. But they aren’t the only homes coming to Auburn.

About 1,500 new rooftops will spring up in already approved subdivisions across the city over the next few years, according to numbers provided by City Administrator Alex Mitchem. It won’t happen all at once, though, as developers will be capped at placing no more than 100-150 homes at one time.

Hawa Davis, who moved to Auburn from Liberia about 21 years ago, sells specialty jams, local honey and handmade items out of her store MS:16 in the Whistlestop Shops. She said she enjoys the town’s quiet environment and is just fine sharing it with incoming residents.

“People always say I live in the country; well, I tell them it’s peaceful,” Davis said between helping customers on a Saturday afternoon.

The new homeowners will help put more money into Auburn’s economy by driving up sales at local businesses, Davis said.

“Harmony is going to be a showpiece,”

Blechinger said. “Whenever you have tourists come in, they spend their money while they’re here. That’s always good.”

Not everyone is keen on the growth, though. Residents packed the room at a City Council meeting this year to speak out against Auburn annexing hundreds of acres of unincorporated Barrow County land for nearly 1,000 homes.

Those opposed to the addition of new homes raised concerns about overburdening schools, traffic buildup and deterioration of the small-town charm. A few people warned against Auburn becoming overdeveloped like the rest of Gwinnett County.

Others argued that growth can't be stopped and said city leaders should take the land to have more local control over it. And that's eventually what happened.

"It's our hometown, so yeah, we're going to make sure that we protect it," said Blechinger, who took office as mayor in 2005.

"The day will come that I'm gone from the earth, and we want to know that we're leaving the city in great condition for future generations."